

June 1, 2005: Policy Focus on Egypt Briefing

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Policy Focus on Egypt

Presentation at the

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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Haleh Esfandiari:

Hello and welcome to the Wilson Center. I'm Haleh Esfandiari, the Director of the Middle East Program. A few words about the Center -- the Wilson Center was established by Congress in 1968 as the official national memorial to President Wilson, Wilson was the only president who had a PhD [laughter]. The Center aims to unite the world of ideas to the world of policy by supporting preeminent scholarship and linking that scholarship to issues of concern to officials in Washington. The Center was founded as, and remains, an advanced research institute and a neutral forum for fair, open and informed dialogue on the key public policy issues of the day. We really are very happy to have been asked to host this meeting with our colleagues at the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. They're releasing their policy brief on Egypt at this meeting.

We are also very

fortunate to have with us the distinguished Egyptian scholar and human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim who is a visiting public policy scholar at the Wilson Center and he's also a very good friend. We will have three very brief and short presentations by the Commissioner and two vice chairs of the Commission and then we will ask Saad to comment on the findings and then will open the floor to questions and comments.

I will be very brief in my introduction because we left you longer bios outside. The Commissioner is Professor Elizabeth Prodromou and she is the Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs and she has been a policy consultant to the State Department, the Defense Intelligence Council, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Council on Foreign Relations. She helped also found and sat as Executive Director at the Cambridge Foundation for Peace, which is a non-profit public charity dedicated to sustainable peace building in southeastern Europe and Eastern Mediterranean. Elizabeth [unintelligible] - oh should I introduce the two of you and then - okay fine.

Felice D. Gaer is

- okay shall I start with Nina? Okay. Okay fine. Felice D. Gaer is - has been active for 20 years in the field of human rights. She has conceptualized, planned and conducted research and advocacy on many aspects of human rights including freedom of religion, the human rights of women, the rights of national and religious minorities and prohibition against torture. She is the author of more than 25 articles on human rights, the United Nations religious intolerance, the human rights of minorities and of women. I feel I'm really doing a disservice to cutting this bio so short because they are such distinguished speakers but nevertheless please make sure you pick up an extended bio when you leave the room.

Nina Shea has been an international human rights lawyer for also 25 years and for 19 years she has focused specifically on the issues of religious freedom in America foreign policy as the director of the Center for Religious Freedom, a division of Freedom House. She was appointed in 2001 by

President Bush to serve on the U.S. delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva and during the Clinton administration she had also served on the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom. Let me stop here and start with - who wants to go first? Yes, Elizabeth, please.

Elizabeth H. Prodromou:

Good afternoon, welcome to everyone. My name is Elizabeth Prodromou. I'm a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Freedom and I am joined here today by the two vice chairs of the Commission, Felice Gaer and Nina Shea. I want to begin of course by thanking Haleh Esfandiari for hosting and co-sponsoring the event here today at the Woodrow Wilson Center and also thanking Dr. Ibrahim for being with us.

Just

to tell you a bit about the Commission for those of you who don't know, the Commission is an independent bipartisan federal government entity. It was created by Congress in 1998 in order to monitor violations of freedom of thought, conscience or belief worldwide and the Commission was also created to recommend policies to the U.S. government aimed at advancing freedom of religion in accordance with international human rights standards. We're here today, as you probably know, to discuss our policy, our brief, the Commission's policy brief on Egypt, which is being released to the public today. Now since its inception the Commission has paid considerable attention to Egypt for reasons I think that are relatively self-evident. Egypt, of course, is an important ally of the United States, being the second largest recipient of American aid. Our two governments cooperate on key foreign policy issues such as the war on terror and Middle East peace. Egypt is also, of course, a leader in the Arab and Muslim worlds. And finally President Bush has publicly called on Egypt to really be a leader in the move towards democracy in the region as a whole. And, indeed, apparently responding both to domestic and international pressures the Egyptian government has recently taken some steps that it asserts will establish - will help to establish a more open political process. The results of those efforts remain to be seen.

Now our

Commission actually traveled to Egypt last summer and we met with senior Egyptian governmental officials. We also meet with religious leaders and human rights activists, including Dr. Ibrahim. We met with women's right advocates and other leaders in civil society, and the information that was gathered from our visit to Egypt as well as through other sources reveals continuing problems that have caused the Commission to include Egypt on our Watch List again this year.

Now

the Commission is especially concerned about ongoing violations of the freedom of religion or belief - and/or belief in Egypt including widespread problems of discrimination and intolerance against members of minority Muslim, Christian and other religious communities. Now on a positive note, the Egyptian government has adopted several measures in recent years to acknowledge the religious pluralism of Egypt's society.

Some of these measures include increased efforts of promoting interfaith dialogue and activity, the addition of materials in the public school curriculum on Coptic Christian contributions to Egypt's history, and the issuance of a presidential decree that designated Christmas as an official national holiday in Egypt. The government also formed the National Council for Human Rights.

Nonetheless, despite all these steps, in our view the Egyptian government has not taken adequate steps to protect freedom of religion, of belief, or in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom, nor has the government taken steps to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism and other intolerance - forms of intolerance in the media and the public education system. So in light of these problems that we have found, and we're going to discuss these - the two vice chairs of the Commission will discuss these in more detail in a moment -- the Commission really feels that any lasting political reform in Egypt must include effective steps to halt violations and abuses for the universal human rights in Egypt, and although the U.S. government has publicly stated that restrictions on religious freedom are certainly a principal human rights concern in Egypt, the Commission feels that the United States can do more to encourage the Egyptian government to address these concerns. And with this brief introduction we'll move to a discussion of some of the details of our findings. I think that will begin with Felice Gaer, our Vice Chair.

Felice D. Gaer:

Thank you Elizabeth. I've been asked to speak a little bit about the role of the state security services and the emergency law. The Commission has been concerned that the policies and actions of the Egyptian state security services interfere with freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief and they do so by restricting activities of Muslims, Christians and others. Interference, harassment and surveillance by the state security services are significant problems we found for members of all religious groups. While acknowledging that the potential for violence is a valid matter for state security, civil society groups with whom we met, and others, suggested to the Commission during our visit that removing the religion portfolio from the state security services and placing responsibility for religious affairs in a more transparent and politically accountable section of the government would be appropriate under current conditions. Those of you who will receive that policy brief will see that this is one of the Commission's recommendations. In our view, some shift of responsibility could result in a better balance between preventative security measures and the protection of human rights, and this would be very much in accordance with international standards. It would also allow members of all religious groups in Egypt to conduct their day-to-day affairs without undue interference by the security services. We found there is undue interference.

The role of state security services in religious affairs predates the 1981 Emergency Law. Nevertheless the implementation of the 1981 law, which was renewed for another three years in February 2003, so that means that it will run through February 2006, has further - that the implementation of this law has further undermined the protection of human rights in Egypt including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. The security forces continue to mistreat and torture prisoners, arbitrarily arrest and detain persons and hold detainees in prolonged, pretrial detention. These practices are common.

Some people have been detained on charges of holding so-called unorthodox Islamic beliefs. The official National Council for Human Rights, which was created last year in Egypt and with whom we've met, has recently called for an end to the state of emergency; they were able to come together on this issue only very recently. In light of these problems the Commission recommends that the United States government urge the Egyptian government first of all to shift de facto responsibility for religious affairs from state security services, with the exception of cases involving clear-cut violence, and to establish an entity or position such as an ombudsman elsewhere, perhaps in the Office of the President, to address religious affairs in Egypt. We also urge -- or recommend that the U.S. government urge the Egyptians to repeal the state of emergency categorically in order to allow for the full consolidation of the rule of law in Egypt.

I wanted to address the issue of Islam, minority Muslims, and what have been termed in Egypt by the interlocutors we met with, "Islamists." The Egyptian government regulates and exerts some control over Islamic religious institutions and activities. This is control that, according to the government, is necessary to combat religious extremism and terrorism. The state appoints and pays the salaries of all Sunni Muslim imams and all mosques must be licensed by the government. Sermons are monitored by the state security services. Now the Egyptian penal code in article 98 (f) prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting the three so-called heavenly religions or from exciting sectarian strife. While this law has not been used to prosecute acts of anti-Semitism or acts against Christians, it has been used to punish those who openly disagree with the state-favored interpretation of Sunni Islam. Persons accused of practicing so-called unorthodox Islamic religious beliefs, that in the state's view conflict with its view of Islamic law, continue to be prosecuted in the state security courts.

Now during the Commission visit many individuals we met with reported an ongoing deterioration in the quality of the state education system, a system that is increasingly under control of fundamentalist, religious or political figures. They also cited a decrease of government monitoring of activities inside public schools and a decrease in monitoring of the content of the curriculum. There was a growing sense that Islamic extremism is advancing in Egypt with detrimental effects on the prospects for a democratic and social tolerance, with detrimental effects on freedom of thought, conscience and religion, with

detrimental effects on the human rights of women and girls. The Egyptian government is not taking adequate measures to counteract this problem, especially in the area of public education and the media, in both of which extremist influence is growing.

There

are several groups in Egypt that believe in or seek to establish an Islamic state based on their political interpretation of Islamic law. These groups, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood, are illegal in Egypt under a law prohibiting political parties based on religion. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood has become more visible in Egypt's political landscape, which we saw even in our visit to the Parliament. There are approximately 12,000 to 15,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations who are in administrative detention in Egypt and who've not been brought to trial. The Muslim Brotherhood and some of these other groups have used violence in the past to achieve their aims. In addition, some factions and offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood have used the group's ideological roots as a platform to engage in terrorist activity or the support of it. Some such groups persist in advocating violence. Security forces continue to arrest hundreds of these extremists every year and some are subjected to harassment, arrest, systematic torture and/or prolonged detention without charge. This occurs primarily in the facilities of the security services. Human rights groups who closely follow such cases have said that the vast majority of these prisoners are imprisoned for extremist political beliefs or activities and not on the basis of religion. The Commission thus recommends that the U.S. government urge the Egyptian government to allow full access to the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for each of those individuals charged with violating section 98 (f) of the penal code instead of having these cases heard by the state security courts.

I'm

now going to turn the microphone over to Nina Shea who will address some of our findings with regard to non-Muslim religious minorities. Thank you.

Nina Shea: The

Commission has found that there is discrimination against members of religious minorities in law, in practice and in society. As was just mentioned, members of religious minorities, particularly Christians, Jews and Baha'is, report discrimination, interference, harassment and surveillance by the state security services. The Christian community is subject to special restrictive rules on the building and even repair of churches and Christians, although they constitute about 10% of the population, are rarely appointed to high government or ruling party posts. In June 2004 the Egyptian court system upheld the acquittal of 94 of 96 suspects who were charged in connection with the killing of 21 Christians and one Muslim in the Upper Egypt village of Al-Kosheh in early 2000. Egyptian government officials confirmed to the Commission that this effectively ends efforts to bring to justice the perpetrators

of these crimes. In the Commission's view violent attacks by militant Muslims are an ongoing concern especially in rural Upper Egypt, and the government has not provided adequate protection for Christians.

Material

vilifying Jews and Baha'is appears regularly in the state controlled and semi-official media. Human rights groups continue to report persistent and virulent anti-Semitism in the education system, which is increasingly under the influence of Islamic extremists. Although Egyptian government officials have said that there is no official policy condoning anti-Semitism, anti-Semitic acts are virtually unopposed by government leaders. All Baha'i institutions and community activities have been banned since 1960 by a presidential decree. Thus Baha'is are unable to meet and engage in communal religious activities. Furthermore Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center has issued fatwas condemning Baha'is as apostates. Baha'is are unable to obtain national identity cards, passports and marriage or birth certificates because each Egyptian must identify themselves as either Muslim, Christian or Jew. It's now illegal to be in public without an identity card, which is also necessary to open a bank account, buy a car or get a driver's license. Also, in some cases converts from Islam to Christianity can fear government harassment if they officially register their change in religion, have altered their own identification cards and other official documents, which is against the law.

With

regard to non-Muslim religious minorities in Egypt the U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to fully repeal the 19th century Ottoman-era decree on the building and repair of churches and insure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory and efficient criteria and procedures for construction and maintenance; more actively, to investigate societal violence against any individuals or groups on the basis of their religion and brings those responsible to justice and ensure compensation to those targeted; condemn and punish acts of anti-Semitism, and while vigorously protecting freedom of expression, counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activity; repeal the 1960 presidential decree banning members of the Bahai community from practicing their faith; reform identity cards either by removing religious affiliation from identity documents or making it optional for Egyptians to identify religious affiliation on identity documents; and finally, exclude from all textbooks any language or images that promote enmity, intolerance, hatred or violence to any group or person based on faith, gender, ethnicity or nationality and include in school curricula, in school textbooks and in teacher training materials the concepts of tolerance and respect for human rights, including religious freedom. Textbooks should be reviewed in light of the standards for education set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Regarding U.S. policy, the Commission suggests that if - recommends if reform efforts in Egypt are to make meaningful progress the U.S. government must increase its efforts to encourage President Mubarak to uphold the rule of law and Egypt's international human rights commitments. The U.S. government should also do more to support those groups in Egypt who are pressing

for these and similar objectives. Given the increased public emphasis by President Bush on U.S. policy to promote democracy in Egypt, the Commission feels strongly that the United States government should come to a specific agreement with the Egyptian government on a timetable for implementation of political and human rights reforms. These reforms should include the specific steps that we have just discussed. If deadlines are not met the U.S. government should reconsider the scope of its economic assistance and offer direct support for Egyptian human rights and other civil society organizations without prior approval by the Egyptian government. So with that I conclude and we look forward to Dr. Ibrahim's comments and we're happy to answer any questions.

Haleh Esfandiari:

Thank you very much and we now turn to Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who is the professor of Political Sociology at the American University in Cairo and Chairman of the Board at the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, which he founded in 1988 as one of the few independent research institutions in the Arab world. In 2000 Saad Ibrahim was arrested in Cairo. He and two dozen of his staff members were charged in state security court and pronounced guilty and sentenced to seven years of hard labor. That sentence was appealed and overturned but he was re-indicted in a state security court trial and spent a total of 15 months in prison. In 2003 Egypt's highest appeals court acquitted him and his associates of all charges in a ruling highly critical of the lower court and the executive branch. Dr. Ibrahim is currently a visiting public policy scholar at the center and he continues to be among the most respected voices on democracy and human rights in the Middle East.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Thank you Haleh and thank you all Commissioners and writers of this very important report. And let me start by thanking all people here in attendance for sharing this discussion. This is an issue which I have been fighting for, that is to do away with discrimination, for the last 30 years and therefore the work of the Commission is very relevant to my own work and one of the charges against me when I was tried was spreading rumors and defaming the Egyptian state by claiming that the Copts of Egypt and other minorities are subject to discrimination. I wish your report was in place at the time I was tried no [unintelligible] of evidence that I am not the only one who was saying that, that there are others who have investigated and came to the same conclusions. The report is very balanced, very restrained actually, and has been quite constructive in making its recommendations and therefore I congratulate the writers of the report and it will help us, those who are fighting for equality and fighting for democracy and the rule of law definitely will benefit tremendously from the report.

Let

me then make three or four comments about the situation in Egypt. There is always a context and there's always a text and there's always a pretext. Let me say something about each one of these, because in terms of law, constitution, Egypt probably has some of the best documents. That is the text. However the context is different. The context is what the Commission has found. It is what I have found and documented over the last 30 years, that there is stark discrimination among anyone who does not line up behind the state ideology, the state control and who does not praise or sing the praise of [unintelligible] presidency. This is generally the situation and minorities being what they are, minorities, different in the religion or in beliefs or in rituals or sometimes just in very small external appearance are subject to this kind of discrimination because they do not line up. They do not conform totally to the Egyptian state to the [unintelligible] state.

Now

the state however has used certain things to a pretext to justify its behavior and one of these pretexts is the fight against Islamic extremists. As a matter of fact we have also on occasions found that should some of those extremists moderate and give up extremism, the Egyptian state gets scared because it will lose one of its pretexts, one of its ploys, to keep its total control of the Egyptian society. This is not the only ploy; they use also the ploy that if they allow freedom of belief, if they allow freedom of expression, then anti-Semitism will be increased and the peace with Israel actually will be threatened.

And they know that this appeals to the Americans and to the Westerners, that somehow the Egyptian state or the Egyptian regime is safeguarding the peace process. And some of you may remember when the Foreign Minister of Egypt was here about three or four months ago, every time they talked about political freedom, about the incarceration of one of the public figures, he will immediately talk about Sharm al-Sheikh and the role of Egypt in bringing the Palestinians and the Israelis together. And so in that since we have to be careful and very alert to the pretext that the Egypt regime has often used.

Alright, to move from that on to the immediate subject matter, I think that the recommendations made by the report are all sound and could all make the situation in Egypt far better and to help the situation of minorities. If the situation of religious freedom is improved in Egypt it will improve the entire region for the very reasons that are also in the report that Egypt is a pivotal country, is an important country. It sets the pace, it leads the region in many ways good and bad, so if the situation is bad in Egypt it could be expected to find echo of this elsewhere in the region.

Alright,

I think the important part of the report about putting the portfolio or the file of the religious minorities with the presidency is very good

and we have urged the Egyptian state to do that. However, the state security, which is a police arm, is fighting tooth and nail to maintain that portfolio under their jurisdiction, and this is not just the pure democratic empire building; it is because Egypt in many ways is a police state. Everything in Egypt has to obtain a permit to take place. If I want to hold a rally, if I want to organize a public lecture, if I want to organize a march, a demonstration, I have to get a state permit. To get promoted from an assistant professor to an associate, or a full professor to become a dean, to assume any office you have to get the clearance from the state security. A university has to get a clearance before they take any step, and then just using examples here to illustrate the case, and therefore, when we come to the issues of religion and religious freedoms you find Muslim sects, heterodox sects, people who are not Sunni Muslims, like the Shiites for example, like the Wahhabis, like the Druze. Anyone who does not conform to the mainstream is subject to the same discrimination and sometimes even harsher discrimination than the Copts and the Jews if there are even Jews in Egypt. There are very few of them and they're very old and they're actually very well protected because again part of the show that the Egyptian state really likes to display to its visitors, especially if the Commission has a Jewish member with them, but other than that anyone who does not conform to the mainstream as set by the state and by the state partners in that total control is subject to this kind of discriminatory treatment and discriminatory policy.

Alright,

so where do we go from here? I think to confine one's self - I know this is the jurisdiction of the Commission, to making these recommendations about religion is fine. It's within its jurisdiction; however, that could not be done without reforming the education system because everything starts as an idea and people are just mimes, and if there's discrimination it starts in education and that is why you could not have any improvement, quality improvement in the situation of religious freedom without, by the same token, revamping the education system when it comes to religion and belief system. You could not revamp the educational system without revamping the political system and here I have to remind everybody that at one time, actually in the last century, Egypt had had three Coptic or Christian prime ministers; you don't hear about that anymore in the last 50 years, but at one time we had a Christian prime minister in the late 19th century, twice in the first half of this century. We have a Minister of Defense who was a Christian. We have the so-called sovereign ministries - there was no discrimination whatsoever during Egypt's [unintelligible]

But

so was education. We had a superb liberal education system that even though it was probably the purview to a minority, numerical minority, not everybody was educated, but those who were subject to that education system grew up discrimination free and prejudice free. Now, since 1952, the situation has changed qualitatively and is getting worse. The beginning of sectarian strife beginning in 1971 was a small incident and of course the first incident of it's kind in 70 years. Since 1971 the number of sectarian incidents has increased steadily to reach something like, by our own count at the Ibn Khaldun Center to about 64. From one in 1971 to 64 in the year 2004, the last time we had a complete count. Some of these were very ugly and some of which were cited by the report like the [unintelligible] for example.

So

my conclusion here is yes, the government can do a patchwork here and there, and it has done and the report in fairness cited some of these, like making the 20 - sorry making the Coptic Christian an official holiday that is January 7 th, which is good - great because the Copts have been asking for that for 1400 years. Finally the Egyptian state, in the year 2003, made it a holiday, an official holiday, very good. The same thing with establishing a council for human rights which again the report noted, but that council is so stacked by pro-government elements that it is basically a token, again showpiece, for foreign visitors. So what am I saying here, let us think of improving religious freedom as part and parcel of overall change of both the political system and the educational system of Egypt. Short of that you will have that kind of patchwork every time they know that the Commission is coming there will be two sets of reactions. One, attacking before it comes and then receiving it well by the officials and when it leaves they attack it again. These are the three simply [?] moves of the Egyptian government vis-à-vis the Commission.

So in

order not to have that happen again and again and in two or three years, you have a similar meeting and you hear the same thing basically, let us have a drive to have total reform in Egypt and to reduce the control of the state of civil society and to reduce and to do away with Egypt as a police state and to get it back to a full-fledged democracy. I think that approach to my mind, this total approach, is to be pressed not only by the United States but by the United States and by it's European allies because what the regime is doing now in Egypt is every time the United States increases the pressure President Mubarak will run to Chirac, or to Schroeder or to Blair and, you know, cry on their shoulder, "The United States doesn't understand us. The United States is, you know, using this cowboy mentality or policy to, you know, do this," and that can explode the situation. And the Europeans will actually, you know, respond to him very kindly and therefore I think it's important for the Commission and for others who really care about reform in Egypt and their work is to have more or less a unified approach, a cross-Atlantic strategy in affecting whatever the recommendations you have. Thank you.

Haleh Esfandiari: Elizabeth you care to add something to what Saad said or to comment on what he...?

Elizabeth H. Prodromou: No, no go to questions.

Haleh Esfandiari:

Okay. So we'll open the floor to questions. Please identify yourself and just wait for a mic. Yes, please. There's the mic right behind you.

Amir Babri [spelled phonetically]:

My name is Amir Babari [spelled phonetically]. I'm with [unintelligible] on Voice of America Arabic Service. Can you perhaps elaborate on the response that the committee got, that the delegation got from Egyptian NGO, independent NGO organizations? I understand that on a prior visit in 2001 the NGOs refused to actually meet with the committee and that again happened in 2004. What was the response like this last time in 2004?

Felice D. Gaer: Your question is about 2004?

[low audio]

Felice D. Gaer:

We had extensive discussions. We met with human rights activists; we met with the National Council which includes some of the leading human rights specialist, we had access to NGOs, religious groups and the like. I am told that one fringe group objected to the fact that I have publicly criticized the UN's Zionism is Racism resolution and that therefore they refused to meet with us, and I think this is an indication of how twisted things are because that same NGO said - made a whole argument about why Zionism is racism and had no awareness of

the origin of this, the hatefulness of this and the repudiation of it by all thoughtful people and the UN.

Nina Shea:

Well, yeah, I didn't go on the trip myself, but I did hear about it and there was - there were good meetings with independent actors from civil society but there was also, I believe, some harassment during those meetings by the government. So even though the meetings were allowed to take place there was evidence that some of those people were under pressure.

Robin Wright:

Robin Wright from The Washington Post. Two questions, first one for Professor Ibrahim. You mentioned U.S. foreign policy; we're getting mixed signals from the Bush administration. The president himself has specifically named Egypt, Secretary Rice canceled her trip to Egypt and yet the First Lady went there and talked about the wise steps by the Mubarak regime. I'd be interested in hearing your reflections on U.S. foreign policy -- is there any there, there beyond words? And secondly to the Commission, you mentioned a timetable. What kind of timetable are you talking about that's realistic? People in the administration, as well as some in the Middle East, talk about the danger of instability if you move too quickly. So what do you think is realistic in terms of the timetable?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Very

quickly, I just came last night from Paris and during my tour in Western Europe there were a lot of Egyptians outraged at Laura Bush's statement at the footsteps of the pyramid. I think the whole photo opportunity must have gotten to her head so she made those statements that upset so many Egyptians, and as if I am responsible for American foreign policy, was getting nonstop calls from one hotel to another as people complaining, who is speaking for America? Laura Bush or George Bush, Condoleezza Rice? How do we interpret American foreign policy? The Egyptian government took her statement, as well as visits by the prime minister and whatever he reported back home, as if it is a green light to harass the opposition and to crack down on dissent and as you may have seen television footage covering the day of the politicide [?] how harsh the Egyptian security treated demonstrators, including women, and today, as a matter of fact, there is a massive demonstration, women in black today, protesting what happened to their fellow women on the

day of the politicide [?] which was May 25 th. So there is a lot of confusion. We hear good words, sounds like music to our ears as democrats, and then we see their action falls far short, and that was reported to many American officials including ones who attended a meeting in Brussels for the Transatlantic Democracy Network. So there were Nicholas Burma, there was Scott Carpenter, and they heard some of this outrage from Egyptians who attended the meeting.

Nina Shea:

Yeah, regarding the timetable, we recommend that the timetable be arrived at for negotiation between the Egyptian government and the U.S. and the specific steps be made on time, legal reforms, political reforms, etc. You know, it doesn't seem like there would be any destabilizing effects to reform the textbooks as we recommend, immediately, or to cease the message of hatred and intolerance against the minorities in the government controlled media. I mean that can be done - something immediately it seems. The Hamayouni law allowing church construction - that could be done immediately. In fact the government has been promising it for years and said that it did happen several years ago and in fact it didn't because there were delays. So anyhow, there are obviously steps that could be taken immediately without any problem of destabilization that are in our recommendations, and I think the - what we recommend is that the government - our government and the Egyptian government come to an agreement on it.

Felice D. Gaer:

And I could elaborate on that. The key point is that there are things that can be done right away with no harm and they're not being done and they haven't been done for many years as Saad indicated in his remarks. The Commission recommended the negotiation of an agreement in order to have something that would - you could come back to and point to, and we have a recent experience with the negotiation with an agreement dealing with Vietnam that was recently announced in the religious freedom area and it took the government more than nine months to negotiate this. I don't think that we would want to see these changes delayed nine months to negotiate and then more months to implement and again, if you go through the recommendations point by point, there are things that could be done immediately. To stop the arbitrary arrest and the ill treatment and torture of persons arrested can stop over night. On the other hand the - some of the recommendations that involve complicated legal issues - here's one, ensure every Egyptian is protected against discrimination and social labor and other rights by reforming the identity cards, well the identity cards could be changed overnight. The broader societal discrimination may not be able to, but the agreement to make such changes could be done very promptly.

Elizabeth H. Prodromou: Yeah,

I just - a brief footnote to the two comments. Again, I think that the important point is that we recognize that the timetable needs to be negotiated, not imposed. So there needs to be some sort of consensus in terms of joint U.S. / Egyptian commitment to the kind of substantive democratization that Dr. Ibrahim mentioned. And again, I mean we've set out some very feasible performance benchmarks that again, with agreement, could be cascaded and built upon on over time and legislative, educational and security benchmarks and with those identified then the timing becomes very easy to pack down and it contributes to this overall democratization momentum that Dr. Ibrahim I think so eloquently discussed.

Haleh Esfandiari: Yes.

Representative of the Coptic Orphans:

Dr. Ibrahim mentioning, that message because some of us actually were in black [unintelligible] with the Egyptian women protesting. The comment that I have is actually anyone in the panel can answer, can you comment on the role that poverty plays in discrimination and vice versa the role that discrimination plays in poverty?

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: Well

poverty is a many edged sword. Of course the poor are frustrated. They are often-- will vent their anger and their misery on any symbol of wealth and sometimes the government has used that to discriminate against some wealthy Egyptians. If they do not, again, conform to the government line. In Paris, in one of my stops, three leading businessmen who happen to be Copts, have told me that they've been subject to harassment and discrimination and their wealth is often used to incite poor people against them. Now I have not ascertained that empirically myself as a social scientist, but I'm just conveying some of the grievances. Wherever I go I hear grievances of one sort or another, but there was a very peculiar one because usually the rich do not complain to an academician like me. They have other ways of doing it, but they made a point of seeking me out to tell me that they are as

subject to discrimination as anyone else and that the poor - they recognize the local poverty, and that the poor in Egypt have been used to vent out some of that anger against them.

Felice D. Gaer:

I just wanted to give you another example. On our visit, we also spoke with a variety of people involved with USAID. both on the giving end and the receiving end, and one of the success stories of USAID has been some schools that bring girls into education in many of the rural areas, and in one case that was described to us, they did a follow up study. Why are these girls coming - and their families allowing them to come to these schools and others are not allowing girls to be educated at all? And curious as it will seem, one of the principal reasons they found that girls were being allowed to go to these schools and were staying in the schools was indoor plumbing. You can put that into the poverty argument as well. We also found just to follow up also on Dr. Ibrahim's point, that in some of the programs that have been established to address poverty, some of the leading Coptic families and business people in the country are leading those efforts and are working on them, so you have a flow back and forth on the poverty issue and who is able to provide assistance.

Unidentified Speaker:

I have a question to the Commission. How would the Egyptian people find out about the report, this fantastic report [unintelligible]? But at the other end, what are your plans to distribute this publically.

Felice D. Gaer:

Well it is available on our website, and that is USCIRF, www.uscifr.gov. So it is there in English on the website, and I believe it's going to be eventually put in Arabic on our website.

Unidentified Speaker:

Without being flip, I think staring straight ahead is also one way that the Egyptian people might learn about the report, but clearly dissemination in as many languages as possible is the optimal approach.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: The fact that only about 2% of Egyptians have access to Internet, I think this would remain a very limited way of distributing it. I would urge the Commission to find more ways of spreading it by, let's say, getting either a newspaper or a publisher or a center; if you ask our center to do it for you, we will gladly do it. We get attacked anyhow every time you come and visit us.

[laughter]

So we will be attacked more, but we don't care.

Unidentified Speaker: Thank you.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim: For that message should reach a mass audience.

Felice D. Gaer: We'd be very happy to see it published by Egyptian sources, we'd be very happy to see the U.S. government and the U.S. Embassy make it available. We'd be - and the point about only 2% being able to reach the Internet is well taken, but if it reaches the 2% who write in the media and are in control of resources of that sort, then we'll be very pleased.

Haleh Esfandiari: Thank you very much to the Commission and [inaudible]. And make sure you read the findings please.

[applause]

[background conversation]

[end of transcript]